

March 1957

THE PATTERN OF COMMUNIST PROPAGANDA CONCERNING LAOS
1955-1956

A Study of the Motivation of Specific Propaganda Lines in
Relation to Concurrent Communist Policies and Tactics

The Communist Problem in Laos

1. The Pathet Lao, a Communist pseudo-nationalist group under the direction and control of the Vietminh of North Vietnam, have been in insurrection against the Royal Government of Laos since 1953. Since the Geneva Conference in 1954, negotiations have been in progress between the Pathet Lao and the Government attempting to reach a settlement which would:

- a. end the civil war,
- b. reunify the country,
- c. restore the authority of the Royal Government in the two northern provinces held by the Pathet Lao, and
- d. reintegrate the Pathet Lao into the military and political structure of the country.

2. The Geneva Agreements envisaged general elections throughout Laos for the establishment of a government for a reunified country in 1955. Such elections had been scheduled for August, 1955. Negotiations stalled, largely over the insistence of the Pathet Lao on retaining control of the two provinces and the determination of the Government that a restoration of its authority there should precede settlement of other issues. Prime Minister Katay, towards the end of the year, suspended the talks and in December held elections in which the Pathet Lao were theoretically eligible to participate although, in fact, they abstained and the elections were not held in areas under their military control.

Themes at the Beginning of 1956

3. Propaganda from Hanoi and Peking radios and from the Communist press in China, North Vietnam and Laos has reflected in its pronouncements the current status of the problem and of Communist policy at a given moment. This propaganda in the first months of 1956 followed well-defined lines. One thread which has run through the Communist broadcasts consistently has been the charge that American imperialist influence is to blame for all the troubles in Laos.

The Hanoi radio in its Voice of Vietnam (VOV) program on January 5, 1956, charged that "Those responsible for the disturbances in Laos are the American imperialists." The Peking radio, on January 14, 1956, repeated the charge in the words, "Laos will be used as a base for the Americans to open aggression", and "The Americans are plotting to develop war in Laos."

Pathet Lao propaganda along these lines was even more direct and personal. Numerous tracts and leaflets were distributed during the last months of 1955 denouncing the elections and appealing to the National Army to cease fighting the Pathet Lao. One such tract distributed in Khammouane Province in early December said, "Because of America the elections will be held without Pathet Lao participation. The American tactics are to destroy the Pathet Lao and to make Laos an American base where they will station their armies in preparation for war. The Laos people will become slaves of the Americans."

The Pathet Lao also made personal attacks against RLG leaders. One leaflet charged that "the whole government has been bought by the Americans." Lao Itsala, the Pathet Lao paper, stated on July 9, 1955, that "Katay's aim is to turn over the country to America, in return for money."

4. Of particular concern to the Communist propagandists at this time was the question of restoration of Royal Government authority in the northern provinces as authorized by the Geneva Conference, but which the Pathet Lao were determined to resist. The Hanoi radio reported on January 10, 1956, a speech by Pathet Lao leader Prince Souphanouvong denouncing Royal Government military operations in the two provinces as inspired by the U.S. imperialists who wanted to use the provinces as a military base.

Nhan Dan, the publication of the Lao Dong (Communist) Party of North Vietnam, had struck the same note two days earlier when it attacked the Royal Government plans for the two provinces as inspired by the American imperialists who desired to establish a military base there and were even "dreaming of making an attack against the People's Republic of China."

5. Before long the propaganda attack on the American imperialists was broadened to include "their lackeys in Laos" as the Voice of Vietnam put it on January 14. The broadcast charged that the Royal Government had

held "unilateral" elections "under the American imperialist orders", was "sabotaging the agreement between Prince Souphanouvong and Premier Katay"* and recalled "so many acts of double dealing by the Royal Laotian Government."

The Communist Vietnam News Agency (VNA) broadcast of the same date accused the RLG of having "pretended to accept the recommendation of the International Control Commission" /for a ceasefire/ but instead continuing its attacks on the Pathet Lao. On 29 January the Voice of Vietnam declared that "The people of Laos clearly understand that the Royal Laotian authorities have held unilateral elections against the Geneva agreements and have carried on attacks against the Pathet Lao." It urged the people to "resolutely struggle to defend their country against these bloody hands."

Pathet Lao propaganda followed the same lines. A series of tracts directed to the National Army early in January 1956 referred repeatedly to "the imperialist Americans and Katay" as the cause of the war.

Laos and the Western Military Bloc

6. Besides broadening the attack to include not only the American imperialists but their Laotian "lackeys", the Communist propaganda towards the end of January began to shift its emphasis away from the question of the elections, the status of the two provinces and the Royal Government "attacks" on the Pathet Lao. These issues were still given occasional mention, but the chief emphasis was increasingly on Laos' foreign policy and her relations with foreign countries. The sinister role of the U.S. was still played up but with reference to the alleged American attempts to tie Laos into the western bloc, to drag her into the "aggressive bloc of SEATO", to make her a battlefield in the next war, and to prevent her establishing "good" or "friendly" relations with other countries, "especially neighboring ones."

Attacks upon the Royal Government, and particularly on Premier Katay, continued, now based more specifically upon their acquiescence or cooperation in these sinister American designs.

* The two had met in Rangoon, Burma in October, in an attempt to find a mutually acceptable formula, but the meeting had produced only a new agreement for a ceasefire.

7. On January 13, the Voice of Vietnam charged that "the Premier /Katay/ did not conceal his preference for SEATO" and that the "Royal Government has handed over Laos to SEATO." This line was continued on January 29 in a broadcast based on an editorial in the Pathet Lao publication Lao Itsala. "Royal Laotian Premier Katay", said the Communist radio, "has said that the 'Kingdom of Laos would request the intervention of this aggressive bloc' /SEATO/...and 'though some great powers would doubtless declare that participation in the Southeast Asian Bloc is a violation of the Geneva Agreements, the Kingdom of Laos would join the Bloc anyway. '"

The RLG and Katay were even accused of intriguing with the Chinese Nationalists for military support although it was not made clear whether it was with the KMT irregulars from Burma or the Chinese Nationalist Government on Taiwan. The VNA on January 20 stated that the U.S. had promised the RLG "full support from the Chiang Kai-shek bandits" and that "Katay Sasorith, Premier of the Royal Laotian Government, established personal contact with Chiang Kai-shek emissaries during his visit to the northwest regions of Laos."

8. The injection of the KMT question, however, was a side issue, probably designed for purely local effect. Communist propaganda in February and early March paid more and more attention to spelling out the terms of a Laotian foreign policy which would be acceptable to the Pathet Lao as a basis for agreement with the Royal Government.

On March 5, the Voice of Vietnam described the provisions of an acceptable policy for the Laotian Government. Along with the reintegration of the Pathet Lao "without vindictiveness" this included; no foreign military bases in Laos, no military pacts with foreign countries, and "complete understanding" with neighboring, friendly countries. The Vietnam News Agency on March 13 again listed the terms for a satisfactory agreement, including democratic rights, good relations with neighbors, no foreign military bases, no military alliances and a policy of neutrality.

Communist Propaganda View of the RLG Cabinet Crisis of March-April

9. In March and early April, the political leaders of Laos were in the process of forming a new cabinet as a result of the December elections. The leading candidates to head the new government were Premier Katay and former Premier Prince Souvanna Phouma. Communist propaganda had already made plain its views concerning Katay. Denunciations of the

RLG as "American slaves", "lackeys of imperialism", etc., were directed chiefly at Katay although they may be considered to have applied also to Souvanna Phouma who was a member of Katay's cabinet and of the same political party. Specific individual denunciations of Katay had also not been lacking as already noted.

Now, while Katay and Souvanna endeavored to form governments, Communist propaganda made little distinction between them. The Voice of Vietnam on March 5 discussed the political changes in Laos. "Katay and Premier Souvanna Phouma have made excuses in drafting the policies of the new governments respectively formed by them. The main domestic policy is to find ways and means to reach a settlement on the Pathet Lao side on the basis of the Geneva agreement. The Indian Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence with neighboring countries have been advertised as the feature of the foreign policy. But the people have already experienced the Katay government's way of declaring one policy and executing another. Mr. Katay as well as Mr. Souvanna Phouma pretend to look for a basis of understanding with the Pathet Lao. They publicly proclaim their adherence to the Five Principles of Coexistence of Nehru. But everybody is aware of their intentions."

A Pathet Lao newspaper, Sil Tham in May 1956, accused Souvanna Phouma of corruption: "H. H. Tiao Souvanna Phouma used 130,000,000 of government funds to build himself a house at Nong Thwada... The day of the investiture of Prince Souvanna Phouma's government, his wife transferred 1,250,000 francs to France."

Preparing the Way for New PL-RLG Negotiations

10. Katay's attempt to form a new government and remain in power failed. How much his tougher attitude toward the Pathet Lao had to do with his failure and how much the attacks upon him as a tool of American imperialists hurt him are questions difficult to answer. No doubt these factors played some part. In early March, Prince Souvanna Phouma took office as Premier with Katay as a member of the cabinet and a deputy Premier. Souvanna's program for Laos included a pledge to solve the Pathet Lao problem on the basis of the Geneva agreements, an endorsement of the Five Principles, a neutral foreign policy with a rejection of any foreign alliances and a denial that the acceptance of American aid meant that his Government was in any way under American control.

11. While Communist propaganda continued to charge the RLG with violating the Geneva agreements by attacks on the Pathet Lao and of

being under American control, it gradually shifted its emphasis away from these charges about past events and concerned itself with the future policy of Laos.

A VNA broadcast on April 10 proposed a reopening of the PL-RLG talks which had been suspended in November, basing the proposal on the domestic and international policies which Souvanna Phouma had announced. (This broadcast antedated by less than three weeks the formal request for reopening negotiations by Prince Souphanouvong on April 28) It expressed the hope "that the new government will act in accord with these statements." On May 13 the VNA reported a despatch from Wilfred Burchett, Communist journalist then in Vientiane. Burchett had found the new Laos government less pro-West than Katay's government had been. Souvanna had a more sympathetic attitude toward the Pathet Lao and had approved of the Cambodian policy of neutrality. The campaign to interpret Souvanna's generalities about peace and neutrality in Communist terms and to commit him publicly to such interpretations had begun.

12. On May 28 Prince Souphanouvong made a statement which set forth the Communist view of Laotian affairs at this juncture and which was reported on the 31st by the Hanoi radio. He pointed out that while both the Pathet Lao and the Government had desired to negotiate the issues between them, "foreign reactionary forces have been intervening ever more deeply in the internal affairs of our country... turning our country into a military base and colony of theirs."

The Pathet Lao leader then noted that "When forming the new government, Premier Souvanna Phouma also declared that he would negotiate with the Pathet Lao on the basis of the Geneva Agreements, carry out the Five Principles of Coexistence and establish good relations with other countries, particularly with neighboring ones."

"The Pathet Lao forces," he added, "heartily welcome these statements and hope that they will be carried out."

This statement by Souphanouvong was rebroadcast and referred to again and again by the Hanoi radio station. The Peking radio, which had had little to say about Laos for a month or two, took up the same theme. In broadcasts on March 26 and 27 and July 13 and 28, the New China News Agency (NCNA) noted with approval the foreign policy of the Souvanna Phouma government with its commitments to the Five Principles, neutrality and good relations with neighboring countries, meaning, of course, Com-

munist China and North Vietnam. In the last mentioned broadcast, NCNA warned that the U. S. would almost certainly try to interfere with the new Laos policy of peace and neutrality.

13. This last point--that the "good intentions" of Souvanna Phouma might be nullified and sabotaged by the intervention of the American imperialists was not being overlooked by the Hanoi radio either. The Voice of Vietnam pointed out on June 11 that the new policy of peace and neutrality "contravenes the policy of interference and aggression of the American imperialists" and on July 27, asked the pointed question, "But will the Government of the Laotian kingdom let the foreigners openly intervene in the internal affairs of the country at the risk of seeing the country transformed into a military base and battlefield?"

14. The line and purpose of the Communist propaganda from March through July, as new Pathet Lao-Royal Government negotiations became more imminent may be summarized as follows:

- (1) Souvanna Phouma's policy statements concerning neutrality, the Five Principles, peace, the Geneva Agreements, etc., are seized upon, interpreted in Communist terms and placed on the record to commit Souvanna Phouma as widely as possible to these items of the Communist program.
- (2) However, doubts as to whether Souvanna will actually implement these principles are expressed in order to prepare the way for charges of bad faith and broken promises in the event that the Royal Government attempts to modify the Communist interpretation.
- (3) The suggestion that the U. S. will try to interfere with such implementation is intended to imply that any reluctance on the part of the Government to accept Pathet Lao terms is the result of such intervention and is evidence of the subservience of the Royal Government to the imperialists.

Communist Propaganda and the August Agreements.

15. The new negotiations held in Vientiane in early August resulted in agreements, in principle only, which included reintegration of the Pathet Lao into the military and political structure of the country with guarantees of their rights, including legalization of the Party and its front organizations,

commitment as to new elections and coalition government including Pathet Lao representation and a neutral foreign policy. Specific details implementing these agreements remain to be worked out, but the settlement seems likely to conform to Communist desires.

Communist propaganda on the agreements has first of all endeavoured to get the Communist interpretation of the terms on the record. The VNA, for instance, in announcing the agreements on August 11, stated that they provided for supplementary elections and a coalition government although the Royal Government, at that time, had not abandoned its position that elections depended upon constitutional revision and coalition upon the results of the elections. The Peking radio in an NCNA broadcast the previous day had made a similar assumption.

16. Both Peking and Hanoi praised the "conciliatory spirit and good faith" of the Royal Government delegates and welcomed the agreements as a great contribution to peace. Prince Souphanouvong, in a speech over the Vientiane radio which was also reported by VNA, called on the people "to support with all their might the policy of peace and neutrality of the Royal Laotian Government headed by Premier Souvanna Phouma." He declared that the agreements had "smashed the foreign countries plot to intervene." The Peking radio on August 8 had also, after praising the agreements, sounded the warning of the "need for vigilance against obstruction and sabotage by the forces of foreign intervention."

17. The pattern is the same--praise of the Souvanna Phouma government for accepting the agreements in order to commit them publicly to the Communist interpretation and make later Government objections difficult. The suggestion that any modification or qualification of this interpretation by the Government can only be the result of intervention by the American imperialists is intended to discredit such modifications and their advocates in advance.

The Bases and Determining Factors of the Communist Propaganda Line

18. It is fairly apparent from the above analysis that the determining factors in the Communist propaganda line toward Laos and the Royal Government and the changes in that line are not the facts of the situation nor any changes in the Government leadership or policy, but are the requirements of Communist policy itself.

* The identity between the propaganda issuing from the CPR, and the DRV and the Pathet Lao themselves seems to show clearly that both this well-

At the end of 1955, the Communist Pathet Lao movement was still operating under the old program of the attainment of power through armed revolt, with the holding of a secure territorial base and the maintenance of an independent army as its immediate and essential interests:

- (1) Pathet Lao propaganda therefore aimed at discrediting the Royal Laotian Government as lackeys and slaves of imperialism, warmongers with bloody hands, corrupt self-seekers, etc., in order to destroy its mass support and to present the Pathet Lao as the true Laotian patriots.
- (2) Government military activities, designed to restore its authority in the northern provinces, threatened the secure base of the Pathet Lao and were therefore denounced as violations of the Geneva agreements and attempts of the Americans and their Laotian tools to establish military bases there.
- (3) Laotian independence was regarded as a sham and the statements of Government leaders on neutrality, peace, the Five Principles, etc., as mere pretence.

19. By early 1956 two changes had taken place in the situation necessitating a reassessment on the part of the Communists of their position in respect to Laos.

The failure of the Pathet Lao insurrection to arouse significant popular support and the withdrawal of major Vietminh military support after the Geneva Conference made Pathet Lao prospects of seizing power by armed revolt seem rather remote. The new line of international Communism for underdeveloped or former colonial countries was also changing. Political neutrality had become respectable rather than being denounced as an imperialist device; independence was said to be real even when 'incomplete' in the economic field. A principal Communist aim for these countries was now to detach them from Western ties, deny them as Western allies, and align them with Communist foreign policy even while they remained non-Communist

orchestrated campaign to influence the Laotian government and the course of the Pathet Lao-Royal Government negotiations was the result of careful overall planning and coordination by some central agency.

domestically. For individual Communist parties the new line ordained a shift from armed revolt to political action including the achievement of legal status, leftist and national unity programs, popular fronts and coalition governments as a road to power.

20. In conformity to these new factors, Communist propaganda to Laos changed. The primary issue for a political settlement between the Pathet Lao and the Royal Laotian Government became:

First, the adoption by the Government of a neutral foreign policy, rejection of foreign military bases and alliances and good relations with neighboring countries (the CPR and the DRV), and

Second, the legalization of the Pathet Lao as a political party without penalization of former insurgents, and its admission to the government.

Since agreement with the Government on these issues would not be furthered by disparaging RLG leaders, the propaganda emphasis shifted to a recognition of these leaders' good intentions and a deploring of the fact that foreign intervention was forcing them to policies contrary to their real views. This was made easier by the change in the RLG when Souvanna Phouma replaced Katay. The Communists could then ignore the fact that they had previously lumped Souvanna together with other Government leaders and with Katay in their attacks and pretend that they saw a real difference between the new government and the old. The endorsements of the Five Principles, of neutrality, the desire for peace, etc., which had previously been dismissed as sham and pretence are now regarded as expressing the true views of the Royal Government leaders. The American imperialists continue to receive a major share of the Communist propaganda attack, but the Royal Government leaders, once accused as corrupt partners in their sinister designs are now viewed as in danger of having their good intentions frustrated by the interventionists. Not only the Communist aims for Laos are served by the attack upon the Americans, but also their broader aim of eliminating U.S. influence from Asia.

21. The changes in the Communist propaganda do not reflect a changed Communist analysis of the political situation in Laos, nor a re-evaluation of Royal Government leaders--they originate from a new tactical plan. Royal Government endorsement of the Five Principles, described previously as a pretence, becomes evidence of

a peaceful and neutral policy; independence changes from sham to reality overnight. Ministers who yesterday were bloody-handed lackeys of imperialism and instigators of war who must be overthrown are today patriots with whom the Pathet Lao can work to rid the country of foreign intervention.

Throughout this episode Communist propaganda has been formulated in response to the needs of Communist policy and the program of the international Communist movement. The facts of the situation in Laos, the character and policy of the Government and its leaders and the activities of the U.S. have all been twisted and distorted to fit the changing tactics of this movement.